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ABSTRACT

This paper offers suggestions for making ropes challenge courses accessible to individuals with special needs. Federal legislation requires that programs be updated to be inclusive of individuals with disabilities. A transdisciplinary approach is suggested for promoting a better and safer program based on input from occupational therapists, physical therapists, speech and language pathologists, teachers, parents, and individuals. A team approach helps determine what physical adaptations or special equipment are needed, the best teaching approach, and necessary safety precautions. A questionnaire is included that can be used as a guideline for finding out from individual clients what, if any, adaptations need to be made. The questionnaire includes cognitive questions (thinking process, attention span, and ways the individual releases tension); social questions (speech and language); sensorimotor questions (physical abilities and any sensory deficits); and safety precautions (seizures, sun exposure, feeding and drinking, allergies, medications, transferring from a wheelchair.) (LP)

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# INCLUDE ME
## A UNIVERSAL APPROACH TO ROPES CHALLENGE COURSES

*Karinsue Fink-Miller, OTR/L*

As an Occupational Therapist, I have been trained to enable challenged people to have normal life opportunities. After many professional experiences, it is now my belief that including people who have special needs with mainstream people is necessary for our growth as a community. Grouping people with differences (physical and cognitive) in a social and play based activity provides everyone with information that is needed to accept a population which continues to be cautious territory for the mainstream of our society.

In this article, I will give suggestions on how to make your program and delivery more Universal to include a diverse group of people. You will learn ideas about resources to gather, information, adaptations, and a readiness plan. This includes a questionnaire to figure out a person's functions and adaptations that can be implemented before and during a program.

There are laws being passed continually which state "don't discriminate", "include", "mainstream", and "make accessible". What does this mean to you, an Experiential Educator or a Ropes Course Facilitator? It means that you have a legal and moral obligation to evaluate your program. Are you operating under the legislative requirements? Are you discriminating when you can't be or shouldn't be?

The laws guide you on how to make your physical property available to individuals with special needs.

Public law 93-112, Vocational Rehabilitation Act of 1973 states that individuals with disabilities cannot be excluded from participation in, denied benefits of, or subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance.

Public law 94-142, Education for All Handicapped Children Act. 1975 extended free and appropriate public education for all children with disabilities, ages 3-5.



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The Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) P.L. 101-336, 1990 gives civil rights protection to individuals with disabilities in private sector employment, all public services, public accommodations, transportation, and telecommunication. (Office of Americans with Disabilities, Civil Rights Division, U.S. Department of Justice).

How do you present your program to all people? Surely, you have started the process by eliminating stereotypes and welcoming individuals regardless of age, class, gender, race, and ethnicity. So, why stop there? You need to further your boundaries and STEP OUT OF YOUR BOX.

As Adventure Based Leaders, you have a wonderful opportunity to teach and mentor the understanding and acceptance that a disability is just one of many human differences. Diversity should be celebrated as an opportunity to learn, not a fear to hide in the closet.

## Observe, Ask, Implement, Adapt

As Adventure Based Leaders, you are adept at observing people's physical and emotional status. This is a key skill when making your program universal to people with special needs. Using a transdisciplinary approach will promote a better and safer program. This includes gathering the knowledge and insight of specialists, i.e Occupational Therapist, Physical Therapist, Speech and Language Pathologist, Teacher, parent, and the individual. Then, using this information to adapt and implement your program. This team approach will help you to determine what:

- physical adaptations or special equipment could be prepared before the program,
- teaching procedure or ways to give direction that will work best for the individual (verbal, physical, simple),
- safety precautions (especially if the individual is nonverbal and/or a child).

During the program you need to openly discuss with the individual and/or the group:

- the group can work together as a team to adapt the activity for all inclusive participation (crawling vs. running, buddy spotting, rolling vs. throwing),
- safety precautions
- assume that the individual with unintelligible speech understands more, and adapt communication when this assumption is proven otherwise
- allow any individual to participate on his/her own, safely, even if movement is slow and uncoordinated,
- use of Full Value Contract (Islands of Healing, Project Adventure) to help with ridicule over differences (clumsiness, unintelligible speech, drooling, poor muscle control),

- avoid "Doll Treatment" by not being overprotective,
- remember that an individual's risk does not have to be physical to gain emotional accomplishment.

## Readiness Plan

As stated previously, a transdisciplinary approach of gathering information is helpful to plan your activities when you know that your group is going to be integrated. However, as always, be flexible according to the groups dynamics and your ongoing observations of how the individuals with special needs make their own adaptations. Be prepared, but allow room to throw your plan "out the window" as the group becomes enlightened.

It is more important to know how an individual functions as opposed to what they cannot do. This includes cognitive, social, and motor functions. Each individual is protected by the law to privacy, therefore, if you do not have a signed release from medical and parental establishments, then you are not allowed to be privy to medical information. This includes diagnosis and diseases. You should know precautions and have a system planned for emergencies, i.e. first aid, 911, transport plan.

The following questionnaire can be used as a guideline to find out what, if any adaptations you will need to plan .

### I. COGNITIVE QUESTIONS

| | Skill | Function | Adaptation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Thinking process** | | | |
| a. Follows direction | | | |
| b. Problem solving | | | |
| c. Judgment | | | |
| **2. Attention span** | | | |
| a. Concentration | | | |
| b. Self control | | | |
| c. Listening ability | | | |
| **3. Release of tension** | | | |
| a. Frustration tolerance | | | |
| b. Appropriate form of outlet | | | |

## II. SOCIAL QUESTIONS

| | Skill | Function | Adaptation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Speech** | | | |
| a. Verbal | | | |
| b. Nonverbal | | | |
| c. Assistive device | | | |
| **2. Language** | | | |
| a. Eye contact | | | |
| b. Awareness of others | | | |
| c. Awareness of environment | | | |
| d. Emotional cues of needs | | | |

## III. SENSORIMOTOR QUESTIONS

| | Skill | Function | Adaptation |
|---|---|---|---|
| **1. Physical Abilities** | | | |
| a. Movement of limbs | | | |
| b. Ability to get around | | | |
| c. Balance | | | |
| d. Ability to hold onto objects/people | | | |
| e. Uncontrolled vs. controlled movements | | | |
| f. Protective responses | | | |
| **2. Sensory** | | | |
| a. Ability to move when directed | | | |
| b. Aware of up, down, etc. | | | |
| c. Vision | | | |
| d. Hearing | | | |
| e. Fears and reactions | | | |

| IV. PRECAUTIONS | Plan | Contraindications |
|---|---|---|
| 1. Seizures | | |
| 2. Sun exposure | | |
| 3. Feeding and drinking | | |
| 4. Allergies | | |
| 5. Transferring from a wheelchair | | |
| 6. Medications | | |
| 7. Other | | |

## Summary

Human rights laws and people's attitudes are changing the experiential education world to be more encompassing and more universal. Your legal challenge is to update your programs and courses to be more inclusive. Your moral obligation is to celebrate diversity with open arms and adapt to include people of all abilities.

In conclusion, what are the benefits of a universal program? This added diversity lends to the motto "Challenge by Choice". It enhances the philosophy of team based activities and thinking. It is an opportunity to celebrate strengths, accept limitations, and be aware of others' differences for all participants regardless of age, class, gender, race, ethnicity, and ABILITY.

## References

Office of Americans with Disabilities, Civil Rights Division, U.S. Dept. of Justice P.O. Box 6618, Washington, D.C. 20035-6118

Fink-Miller, K & Miller, M. (1997,1998) Include Me Seminars Universal Ropes Course Builders, Training Manuals P.O. Box 12, Albrightsville, PA 18210

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